DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 179 968 CS 205 317

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TITLE What Should We Tell Student Writers?
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 33p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (30th, Minneapolis, MN, April 5-7, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Attitudes; Communication Problems; *Composition (Literary); *Educationally Disadvantaged; Educational Problems; Educational Research; *Evaluation Criteria; Evaluation Methods; Higher Education; *Student Evaluation; Surveys; *Teacher Attitudes; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Over 100 academic administrators, professionals in English, and writers responded to a request to annotate a sample paragraph written by a college student at a minimum skill level. Responses varied to extreme degrees in several areas, with letter grades ranging from B to F and annotations ranging from declaring the student's situation hopeless to expressing the student's potential and need for understanding and direction. Sixty-six percent of the respondents annotated the composition itself, 5 percent responded only with letter grades, and 29 percent commented only in a space provided with no marking on the composition. Other responses tallied covered kinds of comments, classifying the student as to ethnic background, the validity of placing the student in a college level English course, praising the student, and criticizing the assignment. Responses also indicated that administrators were more thorough annotators than nonadministrators, professionals in English were more lenient than nonprofessionals, and writers showed little contrast with nonwriters. (AEA)

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What Should We Tell Student Writers?

By Louie Crew

After twenty years of marking papers, I am still not very confident about my annotations. To get a profile of professional opinion, I recently sent to 456 persons a sample student paragraph (Table 1) written by an especially industrious young man whom I felt I had inadequately served.

My addressees responded as follows. Superior numbers indicate members of the subclasses reported throughout this project--[1]academic administrators, [2]professionals in English, and [3]writers.

	Addressed	Responded	
[1]The Chancellor and the regents of the University System of Georgia	16	4	25%
[1]All college presidents in the University System of Georgia	32	7	22%
[1,2]All chairpersons of English departments in the University System of Georgia	32	9	28%
[2,3]Speakers on composition at recent panels of The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)	29	10	34%

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	Addressed	Responded	
[2]Members of the Modern Language Association, in English, randomly chosen (MLA)	50	10	20%
[2,3]Editors of academic publications	25	12	48%
[2,3]Editors of small press publications	25	11	44%
[2,3]Authors of current freshman textbooks in composition	25	9	36%
[2]The director and fellows of the National Endowment for Humanities (NEH) seminar on Standard English, Texas, 1977	13	10	77%
[2,3]Miscellaneous writers and teachers	6	5	83%
General faculty members: all of my colleagues at Fort Valley State College	153	23	15%
Business executives, randomly chosen from the Yellowpages of Atlanta, Austin, Houston, and New York City	50	4	8%
Total	456	114	25%

Not surprisingly, persons most accustomed to marking papers responded more readily. The academic administrators' sizeable response augurs their concern about composition. The comparably low response of general faculty members suggests that many colleagues outside English do not readily conceive of

composition as their province. The low response from business executives suggests their disinterest in pedagogical questions about composition. Interestingly, 10 percent of the forms addressed to business executives were returned by the Post Office marked "moved, no forwarding address," compared with only .73 percent thus returned for all other addressees. Clearly the Yellowpages do not give access to business executives comparable to the access afford by directories of scholars, writers, editors, and academic administrators.

ed/

The Annotations of the Composition

Of all who responded, 66 percent annotated the composition itself (Table 2), 5 percent responded only with letters, and 29 percent commented only at the space provided at the bottom. Roughly half (49 percent) responded with both annotations on the composition itself and comments at the bottom. The reasons given for no annotations of the composition itself were as varied as these samples:

> I'd mark only what the class had been working on that week--otherwise the student will be too discouraged.
>
> --Elizabeth McPherson, author of Linguistics and Language

> I would not dignify this by marking more than the first two sentences. I would suggest that the student who wrote it be placed in a non-credit 5th-grade English preparatory class.
>
> --Ralph S. Wehner, Thiel College

> If the student hadn't had time to proofread this piece of writing, I would not be marking for grammar.
>
> --NEH fellow

(Throughout, names are given only for those who gave permission to be identified.) One person explained his skimpy explanations: "On freshman themes I merely circle the mistake, and ask the student to find out what it is. This is a university, and I can assume that all students have had English in high school" (Jack Garlington, ed., Western Humanities Review).

Easily obscured in a quantitative analysis is the possible cogency of people who had clear pedagogical reasons for relatively minimal, highly selective annotations, as in these two examples:

> In a case like the one above, I would not worry about the marking or commenting about stylistic niceties--logicality, transitions, syntactic variety, and the like. Better, I think, to focus on the problems of verb tense, number of noun, and lack of idiomatic conformity.
>
> --Gary Sloan, Louisiana Polytechnic Institute

> Normally, I would mark verb form and other word-ending problems, but I don't think that a student would have had a chance to edit in 15 minutes.
>
> --NEH fellow

Others sounded notes of hopelessness:

> Even when one gets past the dialectical differences in handling tense,

> etc., one is still left with an incident that is barely elementary school level in its development of content and its handling of language and logic.
>
> --MLA member

> So many errors in the above that markings for style, etc., seemed hopeless.
>
> --Betsy Colquitt, ed., Descant

> I'd give the paper F and begin all over again by pointing out that in order to writ [sic] understandably we have to speak grammatically. It would be a long row to hoe.
>
> --Ray B. Brown, ed., Journal of Popular Culture

> My first reaction would have been to throw up my hands in despair. More than six papers like this and they would never get graded.
>
> --librarian colleague

Others urged understanding:

> I know you didn't have enough time to edit carefully. I'd like to talk with you about your paper and to see how the tutoring sessions are going. Please come in as soon as possible.
>
> --NEH fellow

> This student needs a great deal of understanding and a very patient person to tutor him/her.
>
> --Madelyn Chennault, colleague in education

Of those who annotated the composition itself, 19 percent did so with lines and circles but without explanations, 25 percent did so with abbreviations or a numerical key to a grammar book, and 56 percent wrote out most of their comments.

The six specific categories of items marked on the composition (see Table 2) offended unequally:

Category.	Average response
verb forms	85%
spelling	82%
number markers	81%
syntax/omissions	68%
punctuation	61%
diction	33%

The patterns of offense are less clear in a listing of individual items in descending order of the percentage of annotators marking them. The first number is from Table 1; the second number is the percentage of respondents annotating:

14-95	16-89	22-84	13-80	36-73	37-71	19-61	7-19
11-92	4-88	33-84	3-79	2-72	1-69	20-61	10-16
39-92	23-88	44-84	12-79	15-72	17-69	32-49	25-15
5-91	18-87	26-81	41-79	8-71	30-69	34-35	21-8
29-91	9-84	6-80	27-73	28-71	35-67	38-35	24-7
							31-4

Clearly, in responding to writing at this level, most annotators give higher

priority to mechanics over substance or the niceties of word choice. Few even attended to the student's organization, as evidenced by the fact that only 10 percent of the respondents suggested any kind of sentence-combining.

Of the mechanics annotated, perhaps the only surprises are the relatively moderate attention given to the bugbear comma splice (item #27, 73 percent, with only the academic administrators more radically sensitive at 87 percent) and the relatively low attention accorded the lack of commas after the introductory adverbial clauses, items #34 and #38 (35 percent response to each).

Three issues evoked great disagreement among the annotators, specifically whether to allow the diction of therefore (items #19 and #35: only 45 percent of the professional in English challenged the first use, compared with 82 percent of those not in English; only 52 percent of the professionals in English challenged the second use, compared with 85 percent of those not in English); whether to require a comma after therefore (items #20 and #36, with nearly the same split between professionals in English and all others); and the correction of the spelling in the title (93 percent of the academic administrators began their corrections with the title item, compared with only 63 percent of those not academic administrators).

The single most thorough annotator was a college president, who marked 93 percent of the 41 items tallied; the least thorough was a general faculty member, who marked only 5 percent of the items, but selectively commented about sentence-combining. Overall, the average annotator marked 66 percent of the items; the median annotator marked 73 percent of the items.

The Commentaries at the Bottom

Eighty-three percent of all who returned the composition made some comments in the space provided at the bottom, often self-consciously in ways which one would not expect in reactions to students in a real classroom. Only 30 percent of the respondents addressed the student exclusively, as suggested by the request on the form. Fifty-one percent addressed the researcher only, and 19 percent addressed the student and the researcher. Thirty percent refused to sign giving permission to be identified with their responses, and one remarked, "I am sure I must have missed something (smile)." Even so, 10 percent of the respondents made basic mechanical variations from standard English in their own comments, my favorite being the prominent academic writer's "correction" of prinplin by principle (head of high school).

A few respondents were profuse, 9 percent using more space than the 4½ inches provided on the front. At one extreme, a respondent gave a four-page, single-spaced typed evaluation, the first page attacking the assignment but the others addressing in detail the perceived needs of the student. At the other extreme, many more were very curt, as in this sampling: "See me soon--we have some work to do" (textbook author); "F. Details good, but mechanics fail" (my own original response after annotation of 58 percent of the items in the composition); "Start over" (an editor); "This cannot be accepted. See me or drop course. F" (Michael O'Neill, ed., The Notebook and Other Reviews); "As a small press editor, I would simply return this piece after reading the first couple of sentences, having found that these were gross errors rather than idiosyncratic style for a prose poem" (Bob Millard, ed., Barbeque Planet); and

"This student needs a workbook and lots of conference time and outside tutoring. At this stage markings may not be at all helpful" (Mary C. Williams, North Carolina State University). At least two of the concise responses vented much spleen: "Is this how Bert Lance got his start in the banking business?" (a business executive in New York City, noting our Georgia address) and "I'd say, maybe you should try English as a fouren [sic] language, and then to appease his/her ego give him or her a B+ and say that his/her paper was one of the best in the class" (editor).

Sixteen percent assigned a letter grade, of these 82 percent an F and 18 percent a D by itself or a D in combination with at B or C for content. Two chairpersons of English departments gave Fs with no additional comment.

Fourteen percent used the bottom for a generalized comment of minimal specification, as in "Your narration is OK, Dave, but you need to pay more attention to some of the mechanical details--particularly the endings on nouns and verbs. Please rewrite this paper, and if you have any questions about it, come and see me" (NEH fellow). At least 16 percent tried to be fairly specific, not always with the clarity and brevity of

> You need to proofread more carefully. Go over your spelling and remember to use the past tense verbs consistently. Review the handbook section on inflections. Avoid short, choppy sentences. If you want a better grade, you will have to rewrite to make grammatical corrections, cut out the unnecessary repetitions at the beginning, and give more details about what happened when the principal caught you.
>
> --NEH fellow

One-third of the respondents called for a conference, either for specific tutoring or, more often, for re-routing the student, as in this sample:

> I would call the student in immediately for a personal conference to discuss his educational background and goals and previous experience in writing. I would then arrange for some diagnostic evaluation of his reading and writing, discuss the results with the student, and make recommendations accordingly--depending on the available instructional support services.
>
> --Ray Liedlich, author, From Thought to Theme

Alternatives to Annotation and Commentary

One of the most imaginative responses in the entire study offered a comprehensive alternative to routinely marking the paper:

> If I had the time and the departmental resources, I would dictate and have a secretary transcribe a "standard" version of the same paragraph, changing as little as I could. I'd begin, "Over the span of about twenty years, I have done many unusual things. First of all I'm going to start by writing about this unusual thing that happened when I was in high school. I was in the eleventh grade...."
>
> I would say to the students that there are all kinds of "English." There is home English, there's street English, there's doctors' office English, etc. There is also a kind of English called "college English." That's what we're here to learn.

Then I would explain that I had rendered each of their paragraphs into "college English," and I'd like them to take some time to study the differences between college English and the English that they had used in their paragraphs and to underline all the differences that they notice.

Then I'd invite them to ask me questions about the differences....

If I didn't have those resources, then I'd simply write at the bottom of his paragraph, "I found this a very interesting story. I especially liked the way you paced it. We've got some things to talk about, but in the meantime, for your next writing assignment, would you either tell what you would have done if the principal had not come, or retell this story as if you were the principal.

The point in all this is that I'm not going to help this kid much by ripping his paragraph apart. He does have some things going for him, and I'd like him to keep them going. What I think I need most of all is some time to establish my credibility and a teaching/learning climate in which he might grow.

--Robert Hogan, Executive Secretary, NCTE

At least 10 percent of the respondents offered suggestions about how to assess the differences between the student's oral and written competence, as in these samples:

I recommend that the student be referred to your Speech and Hearing Clinic. I suspect that his writing problems are symptomatic of underlying problems.

--Kenneth W. Houp, author, Reporting Technical Information

> What you need to work at is verb tenses. Maybe reading this aloud would help you to detect that you had written the wrong tense of the verb in many of your sentences. The lapses in idiom may take you longer to overcome, but again, maybe you could have avoided some of the lapses by reading aloud what you had written.
>
> --Edward P. J. Corbett, ed., College Composition and Communication

> What I'd do, I guess, is not "mark" the paragraph at all, but talk to the author, beginning by telling him he's got a good story here. Then I'd ask him to read it aloud, slowly, to see if he and I could focus on one or two of the problems--usual usually unusual.
>
> --Walker Gibson, University of Massachusetts

> A key part of this process is oral--probing, helping the student open up, trying to make sure that the student's technical and grammatical weaknesses do not completely block and inform what he has to say. Only at this later point would I concentrate on the level of grammar.
>
> --Jeffrey Youdelman, Fashion Institute of Technology

Classifying the Student

Several of the respondents volunteered the information that this student is outside their usual experience. Donald E. Bower, Director of the National Writers Club, was incredulous:

> I cannot believe that this is a serious piece of work. I think the student was pulling somebody's leg. If such is not the case, and we are graduating students from high school who do not know how to read

> or write (I have to assume he can't read), we're in the midst of a tragic circumstance.

James Sledd at the University of Texas in Austin said: "Louie, I don't get this sort of writing from my students. If I did, it wouldn't make the least difference how I marked the paper, because the student would flunk out . . . no matter what I did." Walker Gibson at the University of Massachusetts said: "I've simply never encountered anything remotely like this paragraph. Protected, you'll say. I know of course that such writing exists, thanks to Mina Shaughnessy and others." Ralph S. Wehner, Emeritus Professor at Thiel College, complained: "Does your college have absolutely no admission standards? I have taught English for forty years, and even though freshman writing has been becoming progressively worse, I have never encountered anything quite as bad as this--except perhaps from a Chinese or Arabian student."

In contrast, many others stressed their familiarity with this kind of student. An NCTE panelist said: "Believe me, this is not the worst paper I've seen." The coordinator of graduate studies in a midwestern state university said: "I have received many such papers in college freshman English. Patricia Williams Jeffery wrote: ""As a teaching assistant and part-time faculty member at the University of Delaware, I have received many papers similar in calibre to this one. . . . This type of paper is common at the community college and business college also. I have found from experience." One of my own colleagues, Prof. Fereydoun Jalali, in Electrical Engineering, empathized rather engagingly:

> I will appreciate it if you will return the favor by correcting the enclosed samples of lab report discussion I receive from our

seniors!

At least the "unusual thing" that your student [illegible] quite clear from his description. Sometimes I don't understand what it is they are trying to convey--forget the grammar!

Although the student's race, black, was not specified on the form, several respondents felt it important to address ethnicity, often very differently, as in these samples:

> [One] part of the problem can't so easily be corrected. Many of the usages here are standard Black English. You will in effect have to make your students bilingual.
>
> --an editor

> The writer could be any color, to be sure, but the thing I object to is that many who receive this paper will assume the writer is black, simply because they, if Southern, do not recognize the reality of their own dialect, or they have been brain-washed by the "Black English" hucksters.... A paper like [the student's] does not need to be hung out on a national line to elicit the all-too-ready inference that blacks are more stupid than "we" thought.... In my view, students deserve to be taught, not pilloried.
>
> --Virginia Burke, University of Wisconsin

> In addition to marking the paper, I would try to determine whether the student was a speaker of a social or ethnic dialect like Black English. The consistency of his/her use of "unmarked" verb forms in the past tense and single marking of noun plurals...indicated that

this is a possibility. If so, I would try to help the student distinguish between the structure of his/her dialect and that of standard English. My goal ultimately would be to have the student gain control of those parts of the grammatical system that diverged from his/her dialect rather than make individual, isolated corrections of "errors."

--Ellen D. Kolba, CARIBOU, educational consultants

I wouldn't laden the student with the whole range of interference points between his/her dialect and other dialects of American-edited English. And I'd try to have any changes in the student's writing result from the student's own free will, not just to conform to my arbitrary taste. I'd be especially careful not to put the student off--the important moment is getting the student's confidence and not to frighten him/her off.

--Tony Wolk, ed., CLAC

Linguist William A. Stewart at City University of New York felt that the solution for the student was accesible, except for political opposition:

All of the "mistakes" in your sample of freshman writing strike me as having clear linguistic causes--ones which can be (or, rather, could be) dealt with in a special course on Standard English for dialect speakers. Take "An Unusually Thing." In one common kind of nonstandard usage, usual is the normal equivalent of Standard English usually, ~~then~~ hence I usual go(es), etc. Then, at some point, this gets "corrected," but the correction process is extended

> to include cases of usual that in fact aren't usually in Standard English. And so the hypercorrection in the paper's title and on lines 1, 3, and 4.
>
> Unfortunately, it is now considered by the National Council of Teachers of English to be an act of oppression to teach Standard English to students who do not come by it naturally.

Wayne O'Neil, at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who has previously written forcefully about the oppressiveness of some forms of instruction used for Standard English, particularly the teaching of bi-dialectalism, held out for a different goal for this student: "I stand for logic and clarity (and standard spelling and punctuation) within natural and local idiom: that's what it comes down to finally. But it's a long hard road to follow with a lot of re-doing and rebuilding along the way."

Others warned of the world to which the student aspires to graduate. Regent John Maddox, an attorney, stressed:

> The student writer should be told that the ability to communicate in standard English is essential to success in the business world. The ability to use the English language is one of the marks of an educated person. Nothing more dramatically reflects a lack of education than errors in spelling and grammar in written communication.

Michael O'Neill, who teaches writing in the Commerce Department of the University of Alabama, stressed: "The critical point, as always, is how badly will this kind of writing hurt the student once he/she is on the job. It's a sticky problem."

Placement

Several citations have already indicated that many respondents challenged this student's being allowed to take a credit course in freshman English. Eight percent specifically complained that the student should still be in high school or lower grades. Two suggested radical extra-academic responses. Ralph S. Wehner, at Thiel College, said: "If he has native intelligence, his grade school and high school teachers should be indicted for criminal negligence." Robert J. Nimmer, at Burlington County College, was even more forceful:

> Sue your high-school board of education on two counts:
> 1. Dereliction of duty, 2. Fraud.
>
> On the first count, your board has not fulfilled its responsibility of assuring that upon graduation, you are equipped with at least minimum writing skills.
>
> On the second count, your board of education has fraudulently led you to believe that you have satisfactorily met the requirements for graduation in spite of the fact that your writing clearly indicates that you should not have been granted a diploma.

One regent suggested: "I would send a copy of this to his/her former High School [sic] principal"; but the student explained to me that the principal had died. The new principal in his home county did respond, marking 76 percent of the items (cf. the average of 66 percent marked by all respondents).

Twenty-one percent of the respondents stressed the need for placing such students in remedial courses at the college level, with varying degrees of

commitment to such programs. George C. Klinger at the University of Evansville stressed: "I hope your school is making an effort--as ours is--to start with this student where he is (not where he should be when he starts in college) and provide the instruction he needs to catch up. Some are not salvageable, but many are." One college president complained: "It is unbelievable that your institution should allow a student to reach college-level classes before suitable remedial remedy is secured for such a student." Edgar V. Roberts, author of Writing Themes About Literature, observed: "If such students were in ordinary freshman comp, it would be impossible to carry on a normal class. Yet Virginia Burke, at the University of Wisconsin, stressed: "A teacher receiving such a paper should rejoice that he/she can really do some teaching. One-to-one laboratory work with the student should produce great improvement since the student is ready for it."

Others stressed that college teachers waste energy when they presume to find miraculous solutions for such students, as agreed two folks not often in such concord, in their refusal to annotate the paper itself:

> You see, what you're asking me in effect is: "Once you let the horse out of the barn, how would you secure the door so that it couldn't escape?"
>
> Fort Valley College is not responsible for that student's problems with English composition--and, I very much suspect, oral use of standard English. Since Fort Valley College is a college, that student must have come to you from a high school, and to the high school from a junior high, middle school, or elementary school, and so on. It does seem to me that they are in no small sense

responsible for preparing their students to go on to college --Fort Valley or any other. For college teachers like yourself to sit there, wringing your hands and saying, "Oh dear! What can I do about this student?" without holding your high school and elementary school counterparts to task is to encourage the problem.

--William A. Stewart, Ph.D. program in linguistics, CUNY

The real question isn't how to grade this individual paper within an existing educational institution. It would be more useful to ask why the student writes like this at the age of twenty, why the student was graduated from high school, why the student was admitted to a college, why you think (if you do) that anybody can do anything much for the student in our colleges as they now exist.

Those are answers, not evasions....

With both friendship and respect, the point of my answer must be that your question strikes me as diversionary. You set an insoluble problem in a way that distracts attention from its insolubility. To pretend that the problem can be solved and that it's our job to solve it is to play into the hands of the people who create the problem.

It's not the doctor who's to blame if Jimmy Carter sets off a neutron bomb and then asks the doctor to cure all the people who get radiation sickness.

--James Sledd, Director of the NEH seminar on Standard English

Praise for the Student

Along with all of their criticism, 33 percent of the respondents found something good to say about the student's paper, as in these abstracted samples: "Your little narrative could be the basis--the start--for a good piece of writing that would interest many readers" (Ross Winterowd, author, The Contemporary Writer: A Practical Rhetoric); "The student should be commended for his clear memory, his logic of thought and his attempt to express these in writing" (R. B. Tilley, President of Albany Junior College); "A good description of what happened" (an English chairperson); "He writes acceptable sentences and organizes his material in an understandable, chronological sequence" (Helen Wells, American River College); "The paragraph shows a basic grasp of organizational principles and a flair for narrative. The syntax, while somewhat unsophisticated, is nevertheless adequate--I like the straightforwardness of it" (an English chairperson); "The paper communicates an event simply and clearly, and even suggests without telling (as we are told in modern fiction writing classes that we should) an attitude toward the event" (an editor); "You have a good sense of whole ideas and direct communication. You draw a pretty fair word picture" (Patrick O'Neill, ed., Lake Superior Review); "I find this type of paper ridiculously easy to contend with; what truly gives me a headache is the paper that has only marginal compositional errors but lacks inspiration or uniqueness" (Jim Villani, ed., Pigiron Press); "In person I would tell him he had a fine sense of style and timing, but would have to work hard to translate that into standard English" (Mary Price, Editor, The Yale Review); "The incident itself is an excellent one, full of all sorts of story-telling room and point and fate and humor. But that's all latent as the writer struggles

between talking and trying to write the way it 'spozed to be" (Wayne O'Neil, Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

Problems with the Assignment

Thirty percent of the respondents criticized the assignment itself, as in these four samples: "A poor english [sic] exercise for any college freshman" (a regent); "Overall, I find this paragraph a very satisfactory response to a 'dumb' assignment, the classic kind that makes a student wonder, 'Now what did he ask us to write about that for?'" (an NEH fellow); "The exercise seems to me unchallenging and somewhat fruitless, not requiring much more than some facility in narrative technique.... It seems to me that no important assignment should be given which does not in some way develop the student's reasoning capacity" (Karl M. Murphy, Chairperson of English, Georgia Institute of Technology); "I think the assignment that he set for himself is probably a better one. Some kids, shy ones, might think that they didn't do anything unusual in high school. But all of them could think of something unusual that happened to them in high school" (Robert Hogan, Executive Secretary, NCTE).

Thirteen percent of the respondents complained that they were not given enough information adequately to assess the context of the marking, as in these samples: "The exact directions given would help the grader's perspective" (James W. Mathews, Chairperson of English, West Georgia College); "It is somewhat difficult to assess this paper in vacuo. My policy is never to make writing assignments without specifying the audience, and the puported audience is not clear from the paper, unless it be a sympathetic Louie Crew" (Karl M.

Murphy, Chairperson of English, Georgia Institute of Technology).

Others worried about the people chosen to be respondents. One NCTE panelist feared that "the Georgia Board of Regents may see only a comma splice, adjective-adverb confusion and spelling, punctuation, tense and inflection errors" and ignore such "crucial questions" as matters of class size, point in the course sequence, the directions given to the student, the student's prior experience, the instructor's prior emphases, the time allowed for proof-reading, etc. Virginia Burke, at the University of Wisconsin, was equally concerned about my seeking input from scholars and editors:

> Editors are totally irrelevant in this problem, for editors never see and do not expect to see the offerings of college freshmen. Scholars--whoever they are supposed to be--react wildly in a situation such as this. This project is typical of projects that float around every eight or ten years and call forth howlings, sadism, and a chorus of outraged pronouncements that the world is surely coming to an end when "this kind of thing" is countenanced at the college level.

The head of graduate studies at a large midwestern university challenged the kind of interpretation that can meaningfully be made of the data:

> The marks that I put on the paper do not at all indicate, as you suggest they will, a professional opinion about what kinds of instruction should be given to students writing at this level. Obviously, the paper demonstrates the need for many kinds of instruction, so many kinds that trying to indicate them by marks on his/ her paper would be time-consuming and frustrating for

me and ineffective and discouraging for the student.

Major Differences in Responses According to the Type of Respondents

Academic administrators were clearly more thorough annotators than were non-administrators. The average academic administrator marked 76 percent of the items, as compared with the non-administrators' average of 66 percent. Furthermore, an average of 12 percent more academic administrators marked each item than the average of non-administrators. Academic administrators marked 83 percent of the items more thoroughly than did non-administrators, and on 61 percent of all items they were more than 10 percentage points ahead of the non-administrators in marking. Far more administrators elected anonymity for their responses (90 percent vs. 17 percent). The academic administrators assigned far more grades (failing) than did the non-administrators (32 percent vs. 12 thus assigning); more of them used professional symbols (26-16) and none of them used extra space (cf. 11 percent of the non-administrators). Fewer of the academic administrators suggested a conference with the student (26-36). These indices of relative sternness (or excellence?) are tempered somewhat by the fact that the academic administrators were also quicker to give praise than were the non-administrators (42-31).

Professionals in English, who are more likely to confront the task of marking papers on a regular basis, moved in the opposite direction, towards more leniency (or laxity?). Professionals in English averaged marking only 62 percent of the items, as compared with an average of 72 percent of the items marked by those not in English. Professionals in English annotated less

thoroughly by an average of 10 percentage points per item, and they marked 85 percent of the items less thoroughly than did those who were not in English. Professionals in English more often (40-13) did not annotate on the composition, but more often (44-16) called for a conference. All respondents who sent letters in lieu of the printed form were professionals in English, and professionals in English returned the printed forms far more frequently (34-16) than did people not in English. People in English were the only respondents to use extra space. They more readily employed professional symbols (23-8), but they also more frequently explained the principles of any annotation (23-3). Professionals in English more frequently followed the directions of addressing the student only (23-3); and like the academic administrators, they were far freer with praise (37-26) than were their opposite colleagues, those not in English. Professionals in English more frequently signed their returns (74-63).

Writers, unlike the first two subclasses, showed little contrast with non-writers. Most probably many people not so identified in this project are themselves writers, so the lack of contrast here highlights the presence of contrast where the subclasses are more nearly discrete. Writers as defined in this study (see superior letters at the opening of the article) annotated items at an average of only .073 percent more thoroughly than did those not identified as writers. Even so, writers were less thorough on 61 percent of the items, equally thorough on 2 percent, and more thorough on 37 percent. Writers did have a much higher return rate than non-writers (43-19). Like professionals in English (where they were also included), more of the writers signed (79 percent as compared with 65 percent for non-writers),

more of them left off annotation at the top (47-20), and more called for a conference (43-29). More of the writers (50-36) addressed the researcher only, and fewer of their annotators (29-45) wrote in their annotations rather than use symbols or the like.

What the Respondents Did Not Say

Through all of these calculations, the student himself keeps reclaiming my attention. Before he reached my credit class, he had spent one term in our Special Studies non-credit remedial program, from which he was permitted to pass. He had arrived at our campus ranked 135 out of 186 in his high school class, and he had S.A.T. scores of 200 verbal, 270 mathematical. Other entrance tests projected for him a grade point average of 1.319 on our 4.0 scale. In his first quarter his g.p.a. was 1.86, and six quarters later it was a barely passing 2.04. He took two years to complete one year of credit.

The paper used in this project the student wrote very early in the term. He was industrious and wrote many extra papers. At the end of the term, when he was writing no better, I gave him an Incomplete and worked with him for three and four afternoons a week in my office for another whole term, at his instigation. He still wrote no better or worse. His major difference from his many peers with similar problems was his persistence. When he returned the next quarter, he took the course again under another teacher, writing no differently, and passed with a B. He has since continued moderate success in the department of his major, not English.

Only a few of my respondents attended closely to what the student actually said. About one out of ten called for more detail, and fewer than that asked how the student felt when trounced upon by his principal. A librarian colleague did note: "In spite of the errors, I still feel that the student might have had something to say. The real hurt is not recorded. I feel that it is there, though." At least two more came close to sensing the student's feelings, but retreated into jargon about the appropriateness of the narrative to the title. Others edged a bit closer, as did James Sledd: "Without directly asking, I'd want to find out what lies behind the oddly depersonalized 'Something told me to open the machine door.'" Only one respondent managed direct empathy:

> It seemed more like an unusual thing that happened to you rather than an unusual thing that you did. I sure don't think it's unusual to help yourself to a few free cookies from an open machine. Of course, I'm not saying it was the <u>right</u> thing to do. Did you feel guilty <u>before</u> the principal came in? Were you real angry about getting kicked out of school for a while, or did you think you deserved it?
>
> --NEH fellow

Possibly efforts to help this student with standard English direct him away from one really profound problem the student reveals that he has, namely his inability to protest the principal's abuse and his willingness to assume responsibility for a theft he has not even done, according to the evidence he presents. The student acquiesced to my own heavy annotation as readily as he did to the "prinplin," assuming responsibility for an "evil"--as if his own

very clear prose is evil in its variation from the standards of professionals.

I am still left wondering whether a respondent could accomplish more education by one simple comment: "Grade of A, very reluctantly: Dr. King used to say that those who go to the back of the bus deserve to be there. Your paper is about something your principal did, not something you did. If you can't protest, you will deserve the continual suspension from power that you have gotten by your acquiescence." Of course, this study is not designed to measure the efficacy of any of the professional opinions it has charted and quantified.

The study has revealed very little consensus about what to tell students writing at this level, and many of the more persuasive suggestions have come from isolated individuals. The profile yielded is hardly likely to boost my minimum confidence which prompted the investigation in the first place. Several dozen more such needy students arrive at my classes at each registration.

# # # # # #

TABLE 1: INDEX TO THE ANNOTATIONS OF THE STUDENT'S COMPOSITION

Numbers index the items most frequently marked by the respondents. The presence of 41 items in a passage of 156 words represents a possible annotation rate of approximately one word in four.

1
AN UNUSUALLY THING I DID IN HIGH SCHOOL

2 3 4 5 6
Over the span ^ about twenty year ^, I have did many unusually thing ^ .

7 8 9 10 11 12 13
Frist of all Im going to start by writing about this unually thing ^ happen

14 15 16
when I was in high school. I were in the eleven grade when I did this unually thing.

17
It was lunch time ^ about 12:05. I was in the snack bar buying a soda and a pack

18 19 20 21
of cookie^ for lunch. Therefore^ I got ready to put my money in the cookie machine.

22 23 24
Then I notice that the machine was not lock. Something told me to open the machine

25 26 27 28 29 30
door. So I open the door ⊙ there were plenty of cookie^ of all kind ^ . Then

31 32 33 34
something told me ^ look down. When I look down ^ there was plenty of money.

35 36 37 38 39 40
Therefore ^ ^ soon as I put my hand on the money ^ the prinplin walk up

41
behind me. He suspends me from school for a whole week.

(continued)

TABLE 1 Continued, page 2 of same

N. B. The form which the respondents received was double-spaced without markings. Italicized directions stated: "Kindly mark the paragraph below as if it had been turned in to you, as I received it, in a college freshman English class in response to a fifteen-minute exercise."

TABLE 2: THE READERS' RESPONSE: ANNOTATION OF THE COMPOSITION

Two-thirds of the respondents marked items in the composition itself. Their annotations are reported in terms of the percentage of such markers who noted each item.

Item # (See Table 1)	Overall	Academic Administrators	Non-Administrators	Professionals in English	Those Not in English	Writers	Non-Writers	
1	69	93	63	67	73	68	70	
5	91	100	88	88	94	82	94	
8	71	93	65	81	58	82	66	SPELLING
11	92	100	90	90	94	95	91	
15	72	87	68	62	85	59	77	
16	89	100	87	86	94	86	91	
39	92	100	90	88	97	86	94	
4	88	100	85	83	94	95	85	
13	80	93	77	79	82	95	74	
14	95	100	93	93	97	95	94	
22	84	100	80	79	91	82	85	VERB FORMS
23	88	100	85	83	94	86	89	
26	81	100	77	79	85	77	83	
33	84	93	82	83	85	82	85	
40	84	100	80	79	91	82	85	
41	79	93	75	79	79	82	77	

(continued)

TABLE 2 Continued, page 2 of same

9	84	93	82	79	91	91	81	PUNCTUATION
17	69	60	65	69	70	73	68	
20	61	60	62	45	82	59	62	
27	73	87	70	74	73	73	74	
34	35	53	30	29	42	32	36	
36	73	87	70	60	91	64	77	
38	35	40	33	33	36	32	36	
3	79	87	77	74	85	86	75	NUMBER
6	80	80	80	79	82	91	75	
18	87	100	83	83	91	86	87	
29	91	100	88	90	91	91	91	
30	69	73	68	57	85	64	72	
2	72	93	67	62	85	68	74	SYNTAX/OMISSION
12	79	93	75	71	88	86	75	
32	49	53	48	50	48	59	45	
37	71	80	68	62	82	64	74	
10	16	20	15	12	21	14	17	DICTION
19	61	60	62	45	82	55	64	
21	8	20	5	2	15	5	9	
25	15	27	12	10	21	18	13	
35	67	67	67	52	85	59	70	

(continued)

TABLE 2 Continued, page 3 of same

24	7	0	8	12	0	5	8	MISCELLANEOUS
31	4	0	5	7	0	0	6	
7	19	27	17	17	21	23	17	
28	71	80	68	69	73	68	72	

As explained in the text, several annotators fitted into more than one of the three subgroups. Only 20 percent of the annotators were academic administrators; 80 percent were not. Fifty-six percent were professionals in English; 44 percent were not. Twenty-nine percent were known to be writers; 71 percent were not thus indentifiable. A color code was used to determine the subclass of each respondent.